

conclusion

GROW OR DIE?

To some extent, we are the victims of our success.

FORMER GOOD VIBRATIONS CEO THERESA SPARKS

in “Competition Has Shaken Good Vibrations”

The news was spreading like wildfire, and my e-mail inbox was filled with messages from feminist retailers from around the country expressing shock and disbelief. Good Vibrations, the legendary San Francisco sex-toy emporium that had inspired so many of them, had been sold—the result of a financial crisis so severe that the company was on the brink of filing for bankruptcy or, worse, shutting its doors, because it had no money to pay vendors and restock shelves. As one feminist retailer told me, “I feel like a parent just died.”

And it was not simply the fact that Good Vibrations had been sold that stunned so many fellow retailers and longtime customers, but the news of who had purchased it: General Video of America and Trans-World News (GVA-TWN), a Cleveland-based wholesaler and distributor of adult merchandise that had been around since the late 1950s. The company was better known for selling blow-up dolls and catering to the “trench coat crowd” than providing accurate information and quality sex toys to urban queers and suburban soccer moms. To many observers, it was exactly the kind of mainstream adult company that Good Vibrations had worked so hard to distinguish itself from since launching thirty years earlier as a quirky, educationally focused, and women-friendly vibrator shop. Had Good Vibrations sold out and “gone over to the dark side,” as one person put it, or had it made a smart business decision in a rapidly changing marketplace? What had happened?

Good Vibrations, like other sex-toy retailers, had weathered financially tough times in the past, but in 2007, when the business was sold, things were different. Internet sales, which just years before had been robust, had dropped precipitously—the result, many within the company argued, of Google chang-

ing the algorithm it used to rank websites. Good Vibrations' position in search results for "sex toys" had plummeted from page 1 to page 8 and sales had dropped along with it. But that wasn't the only issue affecting the company's bottom line. The growing cultural acceptance and mainstreaming of sex toys, due in large part to the success of Good Vibrations and other sex-positive retailers, meant that these businesses were now competing with big companies like Amazon, which, due to economies of scale, could undercut smaller retailers and sell the same products for markedly less. It was also possible for anyone with a laptop to start an online sex-toy business without the costly overhead of running a brick-and-mortar store. The Internet, once considered a friend to sex-positive retailers, now seemed to have become an adversary. And some wondered what role, if any, mismanagement had played in exacerbating Good Vibrations' already shaky financial state.

The situation was so bad that a month before its sale to GVA-TWN, Good Vibrations, in an unusual move, posted a letter to its website outlining its business woes and asking for investors to help turn the company around. "Today, having almost completed our 30th year, we face the need to raise capital quickly in order to ensure that our business survives in its traditional form," board members Carol Queen and Charlie Glickman wrote.¹

How ominous were things? A quick visit to Good Vibrations' website showed that almost every item was out of stock. The company had virtually nothing to sell, and it didn't take an MBA to know that the situation was dire.

The sale of Good Vibrations to GVA-TWN, which was presented in initial media reports as a merger, offered the sex-positive retailer a new lease on life, but it also benefited GVA-TWN. According to Rondee Kamins, GVA-TWN's owner, "everything that Good Vibrations is, GVA isn't and everything that GVA is, Good Vibrations isn't."² While GVA-TWN would be able to provide Good Vibrations with much-needed financial stability and access to inventory, in turn, Good Vibrations staff had the training and know-how to help GVA-TWN—which owns dozens of adult stores in the Midwest—retool its business model in an effort to court the growing women's and couples' market. As one Good Vibrations employee said about the union, "It's a marriage of two different worlds that I think need each other right now."

But questions remained: Would Good Vibrations continue to be the sex-positive, queer-friendly, and feminist-oriented business that its customers knew and loved? And what about its educational mission and outreach efforts? Was Good Vibrations destined to become the Walmart of sex toys, but with better politics?

“I’m glad they aren’t going under,” one feminist retailer told me, “but it must be so much harder to be a radical business under the umbrella of a mainstream powerhouse.”³

What it means to “be a radical business” had also changed dramatically in the years since Good Vibrations’ founding. When Joani Blank started Good Vibrations in 1977, and in the years that followed, the idea of competition, at least in any traditional sense, wasn’t a concern. Blank’s approach to running Good Vibrations, as I’ve discussed in earlier chapters, was intensely non-competitive, and she freely shared information about the company’s finances, vendor lists, and educational mission with entrepreneurs interested in opening stores of their own. But even if Blank had been a more traditional businessperson concerned about competitors cutting into the company’s profit margins, the reality of the sexual marketplace in the 1970s and 1980s was such that Good Vibrations was essentially a unicorn. Its women-friendly and educational focus was so unique that Good Vibrations faced little to no direct competition from other retailers—and it remained that way for years.

By the time Searah Deysach decided to open *Early to Bed* in Chicago in the early 2000s, the tenor of the marketplace, even among feminist businesses, had changed dramatically. Armed with the knowledge that Good Vibrations had previously helped retailers *Babeland* and *Grand Opening* get their businesses off the ground, Deysach approached the company about the possibility of doing a similar internship to learn the ropes of running her own sex-positive store. “They just shot me down,” she told me. “They said, ‘We just cannot do that.’” Her takeaway? “This is not a friendly family of feminist stores.”⁴

Perhaps Deysach’s experience would have been different five years earlier, but by the start of the new millennium, retailers everywhere were expanding their operations and going online, which changed the way many businesses—including many feminist sex-toy stores—thought about competition. It was no longer the case that individual companies were bound by geography, with Good Vibrations commanding the lion’s share of the market in the Bay Area, *Babeland* carving out profitable niches in Seattle and New York City, and *Grand Opening* serving the needs of the greater Boston area. Now these businesses were all competing for the same online customers located in geographically disparate places like rural Iowa and small-town Oklahoma. It was a whole new retail landscape, and information that had once been freely shared by Good Vibrations was now cast as trade secrets that needed to be protected so the company could keep an economic edge in an increasingly competitive marketplace—which, ironically, it had helped create. The era of sharing in-

formation and vendor lists—which had been a hallmark of Blank’s entrepreneurial sisterhood, making it possible for other sex-positive retailers to follow so closely in Good Vibrations’ footsteps—was over, replaced instead by the language of confidentiality clauses and noncompetition agreements (the latter of which I signed when I began my fieldwork at Babeland). As one staff member at Good Vibrations noted about the company’s shift to a more proprietary relationship to information: “We decided that we need to protect the work that we have put into developing those things.”⁵

These trends have only accelerated in recent years, making today’s sexual marketplace virtually unrecognizable from the one that existed when Dell Williams and Blank founded their respective businesses in the 1970s. Now it’s possible for a customer to browse the sales floor at a boutique retailer such as Good Vibrations and, without ever leaving the store, get on her smartphone to see which online competitor is selling the same item for less and order it right then and there.

So it’s no surprise that Ellen Barnard from A Woman’s Touch in Madison, Wisconsin, says she also keeps information about her business close to the vest. “I get inquiries all the time,” she told me. “Somebody somewhere says they want to open a store like ours. I say, ‘Go for it. Make sure you have enough money, good business sense, and a vision.’ And that’s pretty much all I’m willing to give, because otherwise I’d be giving all my information away.”⁶

In retrospect, Deysach understands why companies weren’t exactly jumping up and down at the prospect of helping a potential competitor build her business, but at the time, the rejections stung. Today, she makes a point to pay it forward when people approach her for information and advice. Whenever a new feminist sex shop opens, she sends the owner a note to say, “I am here. I’ve been doing this for years. I don’t know everything, but if you ever need me, I want you to feel comfortable approaching me.”⁷ For her, it’s about cultivating the kinds of relationships and sense of community that she wants to see among her fellow feminist sex shop owners.

It turns out that other feminist store owners wanted to see that, too. In 2009 Molly Adler and Matie Fricker of Self Serve in Albuquerque founded the Progressive Pleasure Club (PPC), a network of like-minded, independent brick-and-mortar sex shops dedicated to providing accurate sexuality resources and safe, quality products. The club arose from a desire to foster a community of peers who understood the unique challenges of running a small, socially conscious sex shop. But Adler and Fricker also wanted to flip the script regarding how feminist businesses approached information sharing and competition.

The duo wrote what Fricker described as a “collaboration manifesto” and circulated it among other progressive sex shop owners. The response, according to Fricker, was immediate and enthusiastic. Everyone, she said, “was looking for this kind of space.”⁸

The PPC, which includes ten sex-positive retailers from around the country, from Portland, Maine, to Portland, Oregon, currently exists primarily as a private networking list for members to figure out how to run their businesses in ways they can feel good about, while also providing a livelihood for themselves and their employees.

“Functioning within a capitalist system can be challenging,” Fricker explained, “so we spend a lot of time talking about how we can do this in an ethical way.”

Undergirding all of this is what Fricker describes as a “belief in abundance,” an approach, interestingly enough, that circles back to the open, community-oriented ideas about how to run a successful business popularized by Blank during the first wave of feminist sex-toy retailing decades earlier: there is no need to fear competition; sharing resources means there is more for everybody, not less for us; more businesses providing accurate information and talking openly about sex will create a better, more sex-positive world for everyone. Abundance, in other words, breeds abundance.

Two businesses that are notably absent from the list of PPC members are Good Vibrations and Babeland. Because they are larger, more established companies that have been around for years, “their challenges are just so different than ours,” Fricker explained.⁹ Most PPC stores have fewer than ten employees and some have only two or three. Good Vibrations and Babeland, on the other hand, are multimillion-dollar operations with multiple retail locations that can buy in bulk and therefore offer customers deeper discounts and early release products, making it harder for PPC members such as Self Serve, Sugar, Smitten Kitten, Early to Bed, Feelmore, and others to compete on the same level. While Good Vibrations and Babeland are certainly not behemoths like Amazon, smaller feminist sex shops regard them as retailing giants nonetheless. “We have a good relationship with Babeland,” Fricker readily acknowledged, “but they are just a different animal that’s not in our zoo.”¹⁰

Labor issues and workers’ rights have also emerged as concerns for feminist sex store employees and owners. In a move that garnered national media attention, workers at Babeland’s New York City stores voted to unionize in May 2016, becoming part of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU). The action was heralded in the press as a win for sex shop

employees everywhere, and Babeland supporters took to social media, using the hashtags #FistsUpForBabeland and #DildosUnited in a show of solidarity. Lena Solow, a Babeland employee who was active in the unionizing efforts, explained in a telephone interview that there was not one particular incident that sparked the organizing efforts; rather, it was a confluence of worker concerns about transparency, communication, better pay, job security, and safety on the sales floor, including more training to help staff deal with inappropriate customers. All of these things, she argued, disproportionately affected workers who were already marginalized by society, including transgender employees. After months of voicing their concerns in meetings and e-mails, workers decided to pursue collective action in an effort to effect structural changes that they hoped would make Babeland the best workplace it could be.¹¹

The move stunned owners Claire Cavanah and Rachel Venning. While they were aware of employee concerns regarding pay, training, and safety, and had begun taking steps to address them—including rewriting the employee manual and raising the starting hourly wage from \$12 to \$14—they had no idea that unionizing efforts were underway until they received the courtesy call from the RWDSU telling them it was filing papers with the National Labor Relations Board. As lesbian business owners, it had always been important to them that Babeland be a good place to work, especially for queer employees, and claims that this was not necessarily the case cut deeply. What Cavanah and Venning had viewed as a perk of working at Babeland, that the job was fun and meaningful because of the potentially transformative interactions employees had with customers, was now a source of friction. Sales staff felt burdened by the emotional labor these interactions often entailed and were fed up with customers, especially men, who did not always interact with them in ways that felt respectful. Babeland's owners had always emphasized the importance of providing a safe space for customers; now employees were using that same concept to make their case for a safe workplace. What had once felt like a united front of sex-positive warriors joined together in a common fight against sex negativity and sexism now seemed like it was crumbling under the pressure of an internal divide that pitted sales staff against management.¹²

Babeland was not the first sex shop in the United States to unionize. In 2004, workers at Grand Opening in Boston voted to join Unite Here. Similar to employees at Babeland, workers were seeking greater workplace rights and protections, including standard pay rates, uniform policies regarding disciplinary actions, and raises to reward employee loyalty and longevity. A generous employee discount on sex toys, they argued, had limited value if they

could not pay their rent. Devastated by the employees' vote to unionize without first addressing their concerns with her, owner Kim Airs lost some of her spark for running the business. Due largely to the unionization drive, she gave up Grand Opening's lease shortly thereafter and moved the business entirely online. For Airs, letting go of the store after more than a decade of success was, she told me, "more painful than the death of my mother."¹³

But for Self Serve owner Matie Fricker, who was a union leader at Grand Opening during that time, the fight to unionize changed her life. "For a brief and shining moment," she said, "we were the only unionized sex shop in the world." Fricker maintains that Self Serve would not be the business it is today without that experience. "Every time someone tells me that Self Serve is a good place to work, I am humbled. I want to create a space where employees feel heard and respected . . . where the front of the house and the back of the house can work together." For Fricker, investing in her employees, which includes providing paid sick leave and vacation time to anyone working more than twenty hours a week, is as important to the business's feminist foundation as sex education and sex positivity.¹⁴

As feminist sex-toy stores have become more mainstream, what it means to be a feminist business in the context of capitalism is being redefined. It's no longer as radical as it once was to advocate for sexual pleasure; as a result, what it means to work at place like Babeland has also changed. Employees are demanding to be treated as workers who are laboring under capitalist conditions as opposed to do-gooders who are pursuing a part-time passion project for pin money. These efforts are drawing sharp attention to class contradictions and workers' rights and, at the same time, staking a claim to what types of issues count as feminist. "It's not enough to just respect people's pronouns," Babeland's Solow argued. "A trans person not being able to take sick time is a feminist issue."

Babeland workers are pointing to a question that has plagued the feminist movement since the 1970s, namely, what counts as a feminist issue and how important is it for feminists to deal with class? Working-class feminists were extremely vocal in the early 1970s about the importance of bringing a class analysis to feminist causes, challenging the idea, as feminist thinker bell hooks has pointed out, that the concerns of privileged white women were the only ones that mattered.¹⁵ Issues of class were not separate from patriarchy; nor were they divorced from women's everyday experiences of sexism and racism. Indeed, the conflicts at Babeland have brought matters of class to the forefront of sex-positive retail activism; and yet, at the same time, these struggles

are also emblematic of a number of key tensions that have dogged feminist sex-toy businesses for decades: How do you balance money and the mission? Retail labor and sex education? How welcoming are these businesses to men? And finally, what does it mean to create a safe space, and who is included?

It is perhaps not surprising that at a time when workers' rights have assumed greater importance in debates across the country, including the campaign for a living wage, these issues have also become more prominent in the context of feminist and queer-run sex shops. While it might be easy to chalk these shifts up to growing pains, it is also the case that the cultural landscape around selling sex toys has changed dramatically since Babeland opened its small Seattle store in 1993. According to Venning, it's no longer a "David and Goliath thing" where feminist sex-toy stores are duking it out with the mainstream sexual marketplace for a place at the table. "[What we do] is now far more ordinary," she acknowledged. "It's not as special [as it once was], so it makes sense that employees would feel more like employees."¹⁶

For Babeland's Solow, the vote to unionize is another example of feminism in action; it is also part of a larger story about present-day labor organizing in which queer-identified and transgender employees are making their voices heard and having an impact. Sex toys and sex positivity are "awesome," Solow acknowledged, but they are not enough if workers do not feel respected. Her bigger goal? "I want every sex shop to be unionized."¹⁷

When Co-ops Go Corporate

When I first caught a glimpse of Joel Kaminsky at Good Vibrations' downtown Oakland headquarters in November 2013, he was in the middle of a phone call with the adult industry trade organization Free Speech Coalition, whose board of directors he serves on. Slim and stylish, with graying hair pulled back in a ponytail and a silver earring in his left ear, he waved a quick hello before returning to his call. A cell phone in one hand and a Bluetooth hooked around his ear, he struck me as someone who knew how to multitask and get things done.

Kaminsky, an adult industry veteran, began working for the family porno business as a teenager growing up in Cleveland, Ohio, so he has seen firsthand the industry's evolution from back alleys to boutique shopping districts. Kaminsky was the chief operating officer of GVA-TWN when it acquired Good Vibrations in 2007; by 2009, he owned Good Vibrations outright and had re-

located to the Bay Area to focus his energies exclusively on running the company.

Over lunch at a restaurant across the street, Kaminsky and Good Vibrations' executive vice president Jackie Rednour-Bruckman (Jackie Strano) talked about what it had been like to bring the company back from the edge of financial ruin and not only stabilize operations, but grow the business and open new stores.

Kaminsky acknowledged that he gets offers "all the time" to buy companies, especially from people looking to unload their brick-and-mortar stores; and yet there was something about Good Vibrations, its history and mission, that captivated his imagination. Good Vibrations was "meaningful in the industry," he said — "they helped people" — and he wanted to play a role in developing the company and keeping it relevant.¹⁸

Kaminsky described Good Vibrations at the point he took over as being similar to a house in foreclosure: Not only was it behind on its mortgage, but it was also overdue on all the maintenance needed to keep the company, and the individual stores, in tip-top shape. "We are building a new house, a new foundation," he told me. Kaminsky streamlined operations, trimmed a top-heavy payroll, eliminated staff redundancies — there were sometimes two or three people doing essentially the same job — and got rid of employees who were not on board with him or the company's new business-oriented direction. He also instituted what he called a "culture of discipline." In his view, the former co-op structure had given people too much freedom to set their own schedules to the point where some employees worked very little. "You have to clean up in order for things to grow."¹⁹

And grow they have. Good Vibrations now boasts nine sleekly branded retail locations — seven in the Bay Area and two in the Boston area. It also has a thriving wholesale business. Despite these achievements, the sale of Good Vibrations struck a nerve with some customers. In a pointed 2014 Yelp review, Amy Luna, who described herself as a Bay Area sex educator and longtime Good Vibrations customer, lamented that the company's women-centered philosophy and marketing had changed "for the worse." "I felt it as soon as I walked in [the store] and so did my guests." Luna pointed to the "gender normative pandering" of selling what she labeled as "porny" lingerie and having it take up the bulk of floor space, which she claimed was "offensive in principle to all the women who helped build your brand over the decades."²⁰ She continued,

When you start pandering to the general public's ideas of sexuality (like that how women "look" is more important than how they "feel") you stop becoming the alternative sex shop that was why you built a loyal following in the first place. Good Vibes initially CREATED the alternative women-centered trends, and didn't FOLLOW mass media conditioning. You were PROACTIVE for sexual education, not REACTIVE for profit. You taught me to be the subject of my own sexuality and then turned the tables on me, marketing women as sexual objects, just like every other sex shop. And, even more disturbing . . . you believe that press kit talking points will prevent your clientele from noticing. That's what happens when co-ops go corporate. . . . It feels exactly as if Larry Flint [*sic*] just bought *Ms.* magazine and the cover story is touting cosmetic genital surgery as the newest "liberation" for women because women are "asking for it." . . . Well, it was good while it lasted. No, actually it was EPIC and world changing. Thanks for that. I will try to keep the torch lit in my work. Hopefully others will, too.²¹

The review gutted longtime employees who had weathered uncertainty and "enormous grief," according to one person, to keep Good Vibrations and its mission alive during what was arguably one of the most tumultuous periods in the company's history. Not only did they feel the reviewer had grossly misrepresented the business, but they also thought she showed little understanding or appreciation of the larger market forces that had almost caused the company to close its doors forever.

Concerns regarding the business's future, however, were not coming just from customers. Some workers left when Good Vibrations was sold, fearing that Kaminsky was going to "cram adult's old business model onto gv's broken business model as a solution"²²—although he steadfastly maintained this was never his intention. Even some who stayed said they felt a difference. One employee who had experienced the company's transition from a worker-owned co-op, to a corporation with shareholders, to a business run by a more conventional capitalist, claimed that there had been an inversion of emphasis: people working in the stores used to be sex educators who also happened to sell things. Now, they were sales assistants that also provided sex education.

Yet other longtime employees, including product and purchasing manager Coyote Days, saw things differently. For Days, the sale was a "lifeline"; it meant that Good Vibrations, a company she loved, now had a chance at survival, and she was going to do everything in her power to make sure it thrived. It also

meant that Good Vibrations could pay its vendors, which to her was significant. These were people she had gotten to know over the years. She had met their families and, in some cases, been to their homes. With the sale, Good Vibrations had an influx of cash it could use to pay its outstanding bills and get inventory onto its empty shelves. According to Days, “We could actually say, ‘We want to place an order. Here’s a credit card.’”

The sale of Good Vibrations also presented the company with new opportunities. It was now possible, for example, for Days to call up a distributor and say, “Hi, we are owned by Joel Kaminsky.” The industry veteran was well regarded among his peers, and channels of distribution that had not formerly been available to Good Vibrations suddenly were. There were other positive changes, too, Days said. Kaminsky promoted some long-standing employees to new positions and gave more power and responsibility to others, demonstrating that he had not only a knack for recognizing untapped talent but, according to Days and others, “deep respect” for the people who loved Good Vibrations so much they had stayed during such a turbulent and uncertain time. “We are doing the things we’ve always done,” Days told me, “but now we are doing them bigger.”

While some people viewed the sale of Good Vibrations as akin to entering into a deal with the devil, others saw it as a new lease on life, as a way for the company to honor its sex-positive legacy and move forward into the future under more financially secure conditions. But it was Good Vibrations’ founder, Joani Blank, who had left the company more than a decade earlier, who offered perhaps the most pragmatic view of the situation. “They did what they had to do,” she said, with a shrug of her shoulders.²³

From Margins to Mainstream

If success has changed feminist sex-toy stores, these businesses have in turn profoundly reshaped both the adult industry and the culture at large. For decades, feminist sex-toy retailers made it their mission to put a vibrator on the bedside table of every woman, of every age, everywhere, because they believed that sexual pleasure was a birthright. Today, due largely to the success of their sex-positive educational and outreach efforts, we live in a world in which women-friendly sex shops are increasingly the norm, even in places like Las Vegas—a city hardly known for its progressive sexual politics. And yet feminist business owner Karoline Khamis refused to be deterred—despite restrictive zoning ordinances and other obstacles—when she opened Toyboxx



Toyboxx founder Karoline Khamis in her Las Vegas store, 2016. Courtesy of Karoline Khamis.

in 2014 in the hope of bringing a version of the Good Vibrations model to one of the world's biggest adult playgrounds.

Nowadays, there's nothing unusual about publications like *Bitch* magazine running full-page ads for feminist sex-toy businesses or publishing stories about the history of the dildo.²⁴ The availability of how-to books about sex that discuss everything from male prostate play to strap-on sex, from open relationships to sex during pregnancy, has exploded. More and better-made sex toys for people with penises exist than ever before. Sex-related podcasts such as *Sex Out Loud* and *Sex Nerd Sandra* examine the intersection of sex and culture, while a growing cadre of sex-toy bloggers review what they see as the best and worst that the industry has to offer.

Budding sex educators looking to hone their skills and market themselves as sex professionals can enroll in Tristan Taormino's Sex Educator Boot Camp and Reid Mihalko's Sex Geek Summer Camp. Representations of sex toys can be found on television with increasing frequency, including depictions of dildos and strap-ons in shows like *Transparent* and *Broad City*; and one Australian university is now offering a course on sex-toy design.²⁵ The 2012 publication of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the runaway best seller about an emotionally distant billionaire and his young female paramour, generated a boom in sex-toy sales across the globe. British retailer Love Honey introduced the official *Fifty Shades* "pleasure collection" and the Adult Entertainment Expo (AEE) held business seminars on how retailers could better capitalize on the "*Fifty Shades* Frenzy" by hosting special "ladies nights" and BDSM workshops geared toward first-time customers.²⁶

These cultural shifts did not happen overnight. The increasing availability of sex toys and the growth of the women's market are the result of decades of efforts on the part of feminist retailers, manufacturers, and educators to make sexual products more respectable—and therefore more acceptable—to segments of Middle America that previously would never have dreamed of venturing into an adult store. Sex-toy packaging with sultry images of porn stars has been replaced with softer and more sanitized imagery, an expensive but worthwhile undertaking for companies hoping to appeal to women on the basis of "friendly, colorful and informative packaging devoid of bodies";²⁷ discourses of sexual health and education, rather than titillation, are regularly used as marketing platforms; and new breeds of sex-toy manufacturers, such as Tantus and NJoy, are bringing sleek design, quality manufacturing, and lifestyle branding to an industry that historically has not been known for these things. "What we are seeing is a confluence of cultural shifts," explained

NJoy's Greg DeLong. "What started thirty years ago with Joani Blank and Good Vibrations—that it's okay for women to use sex toys—has continued to evolve. The Internet has also helped spread information and normalize sex for a new generation of consumers."²⁸

Perhaps the most dramatic shift has been the widespread acknowledgment on the part of mainstream retailers, manufacturers, and porn producers that the adult industry is no longer a world of men. When Betty Dodson stood onstage at the 1973 NOW Women's Sexuality Conference and boasted about her relationship to her vibrator, she could hardly have anticipated a time when adult industry leaders would ask feminist sex-toy store owners like Babeland's Rachel Venning for business insight and merchandising tips. But that's exactly what has happened at industry gatherings since the mid-2000s, where, far from being ignored, women hold the microphone in seminar rooms filled to capacity with wholesalers, distributors, retailers, and content producers eager to mine—and some might argue, co-opt—their expertise. In an industry that is increasingly interested in cashing in on the buying power of women, their status as experts, CEOs, educators, trend makers, and, importantly, consumers has continued to grow.

These gains were hard won. "When I began," Metis Black, the founder of sex-toy manufacturer Tantus said, recalling the industry in the late 1990s, it "was really a boys' club. Men were the important buyers, salesmen, manufacturers, and store owners. Women might be on their arms, but the decision makers were almost always men."²⁹

Black remembers being at one adult novelty trade show in the early 2000s and watching as a product buyer for Good Vibrations was ignored as she went from booth to booth. "She couldn't get the time of day from the big boys, and here was a woman who spends well over \$1,000,000 a year, \$3,000,000 was probably her budget . . . and no one would pay any attention to her."³⁰

It was not just that women found themselves marginalized in an industry dominated by men and steeped in sexism, but that their perspectives and contributions were often completely disregarded. When feminist porn pioneer Candida Royalle first started making porn for women and couples in the early 1980s, she was unable to find distributors willing to place her films in retail stores because they could not wrap their heads around the products she was making. When she approached retailers about carrying her movies, they raised their eyebrows and scratched their heads in confusion. "The market was not listening [to women], but I was," Royalle recounted.³¹

Feminist retailers, manufacturers, and porn producers had become accus-

tomed to existing on a different planet—in their own galaxy, really—their orbit only occasionally overlapping with that of the larger adult industry, because they were such outliers. Babeland cofounder Venning, for example, didn't attend the AEE, the largest adult industry showcase in the United States, until 2007—fourteen years after Babeland opened its doors for business. “I didn't think [the AEE] was relevant to what we were about,” she explained. “I thought it seemed like porn, porn stars, and the objectification of women. For years, I really didn't see Babeland as part of the adult industry. I've always seen us as significantly different, more akin to a bookstore or a community center or something in health and wellness . . . so even though the [AEE] show had been going on for years, I just didn't really notice or care.”³²

As mainstream adult retailers with dollar signs in their eyes adopt parts of the Good Vibrations retail model, it has raised questions for Venning and others about the politics of co-optation—the practice of taking or adopting an idea as one's own, often without giving credit where due. Their concerns mirror some of the same ones that feminists had in the 1970s, namely that feminist businesses “serve as scouts for new markets and as outlets for products created by larger industries.”³³ According to Venning, “I think it's great for women that their needs are being considered, [but] sometimes I feel what we're doing is being co-opted—folks talk the talk, but don't walk the walk. . . . They may claim to be doing sex education, but it's really just a sales pitch. From a business perspective it makes things more competitive, which isn't as fun. I still feel that we are the best of the best, though, so that's a comfort.”³⁴

Feminist entrepreneurs are divided about what the mainstreaming of sex toys and the co-optation of their business models mean for the future. Some have doubled down on the mantra “grow or die” as a marketplace reality. Others, like the members of the PPC, are leading with cooperation and community building as strategies to ensure the health and longevity of their businesses. And for Good Vibrations, survival has meant cultivating new and strategic business alliances in an effort to better monetize operations and remain relevant in a rapidly evolving industry.

Some retailers are confident that the cornerstones of the Good Vibrations retail model, its in-store experience and overall sex-positive philosophy, cannot be easily duplicated by copycat businesses that are looking for the “secret sauce,” as one person put it. In other words, appealing to women takes more than painting one's store lavender and hiring a woman to run the cash register. “What makes us a place where women want to shop comes from multiple things, but I think it starts with our ethics,” Sugar's Jacq Jones said. “We nor-

malize sex in a powerful way. We make available quality information, a clean and welcoming environment, and staff that really care about what they do. I don't see that occurring on a massive scale without a huge cultural shift in attitudes about sex.”³⁵

If co-optation is the industry practice du jour, it may be the price feminists have paid for a world in which, as retailer Jones notes, “folks that were terrified to walk into a store that sold toys will now happily walk in and post about it on Facebook.”³⁶ Thanks to early feminist businesses like Eve's Garden and Good Vibrations, you can find elements of the alternative, women-friendly, and educationally oriented retail model they developed even at establishments like Las Vegas's Adult Superstore. That's where twenty-six-year-old Amber, a Las Vegas transplant, headed after her dog ate her favorite vibrator. Amber grew up in a small Midwestern farming town of six thousand people, a place where sex “was shunned” and sex toys were never discussed. If she wanted to find a sex-toy store back home, it would mean driving forty miles to St. Louis. Now, at the Adult Superstore, a large sex-toy emporium—think clothing retailer H&M but for sex toys—she knows that she'll not only have many options to choose from, but once there she'll be treated with respect by a knowledgeable staff.³⁷

It's a far cry from the humiliation Dell Williams experienced in the early 1970s when she walked into Macy's department store to purchase the Hitachi Magic Wand. The culture that Williams and her contemporaries fought so hard to transform was one that rarely viewed women as sexual agents and consumers who were entitled to take their pleasure—and their orgasms—seriously and expect that others would, too.

Judging by Amber's attitude toward her vibrator errand, they seem to have succeeded. For Amber, there's nothing dirty or sleazy about it—no stigma, no embarrassment. Shopping for a sex toy is like any other business transaction, akin to buying any other consumer product to meet a perceived need. “Things are changing,” she told me. “It's now okay for women to be more open about our sexuality, to have an opinion, to talk about it.”³⁸

Feminists changed the sex-toy industry and, over time, the industry changed their businesses, forcing them to become more profit-minded and fiscally conscious whether they wanted to or not. For many people, myself included, there's a palpable nostalgia for an earlier time when feminist entrepreneurs like Williams and Blank led with conviction and intention and shunned conventional ways of doing business. The images of Williams standing in her kitchen opening letters from customers thanking her for starting Eve's Gar-

den, or Blank sitting in Good Vibrations' tiny shop in San Francisco's Mission District, stamping brown paper bags with the tongue-in-cheek phrase Plain Brown Wrapper, are undeniably quaint and harken back to a simpler time when having a feminist vision and the compunction to bring it to life were all that mattered.

It is no longer the case that money takes a backseat to the mission, and the absorption of sex positivity—or at least a version of it—into the cultural mainstream means that in some instances the feminist messages that these stores hold so near and dear are being diluted. While it is uncertain what the future holds for feminist sex-toy stores, the model of sex-positive capitalism that they promote, one that leads with sex education and frank conversations about sex, is not going away and in fact has become the industry standard. Indeed, the history of feminist sex-toy stores reveals both the promises and limitations of working within a capitalist system where commercial pressures and political idealism form an uneasy and sometimes acrimonious relationship. These businesses have succeeded in bringing the sexual revolution into the bedrooms of countless women and men who might never have attended a political rally or sexuality conference, but who feel comfortable—and indeed entitled—to shop for sexual information and products. They demonstrate that it is possible to reconfigure the relationships between feminist politics and marketplace culture, activism and capitalism, and social change and profitability, creating in the process new commercial and political realities designed to educate, empower, and transform people's sexual lives—although perhaps not always in ways their founders imagined.

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